

Dr. Mercola Interviews Dr. Karen Becker

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Dr. Karen Becker, who's been the consulting veterinary formulator and educator on my site for 14 years, shares her deep philosophical views on how pets enrich our lives – from teaching us how to grieve to offering unconditional love in ways that even humans typically cannot
- › She also offers a wealth of knowledge about how to keep your pet optimally healthy at any life stage
- › To enhance your pet's healthspan, focus on proper nutrition and other key elements of well-being, including movement, fresh air, detoxification and stress management, including chemical stress, emotional stress and physical stress
- › There's a spectrum of commercially available pet foods, and the closer you get to fresh and raw, the better; you can also improve your pet's health one meal at a time by adding in fresh, human foods, including fruit and vegetable scraps
- › Dr. Becker is the coauthor of "The Forever Dog," a book born out of her desire to know why and how some animals live so much longer than others

Dr. Karen Becker in my view is the best integrative veterinarian out there. What you'll notice first is the striking artwork behind her in the video. The art is a photomicrograph of the minerals in her precious pets that have passed on. The breathtaking artwork is created from the cremated remains of some of her companion animals.

“So, it's interesting that you can actually get a hint of an animal's health and wellness status by looking at mineral composition, even in death,” Dr. Becker says. “They do a beautiful job of helping you see vividly upfront and every day the beautiful aspects that our animals continue to give us and the lessons that they continue to teach us.”

Dr. Becker, who's been our veterinary consultant for 14 years, and recently expanded it to [bark & whiskers](#), shares her deep philosophical views on how pets enrich our lives – from teaching us how to grieve to offering unconditional love in ways that even humans typically cannot.

She also offers a wealth of knowledge on bark & whiskers about how to keep your pet optimally healthy at any life stage, with a focus on proper nutrition and other key elements of well-being – movement, fresh air, detoxification, and stress management, including chemical stress, emotional and physical stress. If you haven't visited her new site, I encourage you to do it now.

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Pets' Poor Nutrition Starts With Vet School Indoctrination

Dr. Becker was fortunate to come from a nutritionally minded family, which taught her the importance of healthy food from a young age:

“If you go in [to veterinary school] with the foundation of nutrition, you have something to balance it with. And that was, thankfully for me, my situation. My parents are wildly proactive.

I grew up, my Grandma Shaw taught me how to grow and juice wheatgrass when I was 12. My parents and my mama made three homemade organic garden, fresh meals a day. We never had soda, we never had white bread. So, I went to vet school understanding the power of food. That is not true of my peers.”

When she went to veterinary school, her nutrition class wasn't taught by an independent, board-certified veterinary nutritionist, but by an industry representative — a major conflict of interest:

"I had a rep from the ultraprocessed pet food diet company teach my nutrition class ... that's the equivalent of having a drug rep teach your pharmacology class. There's a serious conflict of interest.

Not to mention, every single veterinary school in the world has a professional relationship with one of the major pet food companies that supplies the hospital and university, with not just foods for the animals in the clinic, but they supply veterinary students pet foods, free pet foods."

Pet Food Industry Has Parallels With Human Food Industries

This process ostracizing human natural therapies from conventional human medicine began back in 1910 with the release of the Flexner Report, which was written in commission for the Carnegie Foundation.¹

The Flexner Report essentially eliminated almost every form of natural medicine, because it was a competitor to the emerging class of pharmaceuticals, primarily derived from oil and petroleum products that Rockefeller was behind.² Essentially, natural therapies and nutrition were excised from medical school curriculums.

Corporate capture also changed the course of pet food, which went from fresh food, scraps of human food that families would feed to their animals to ultraprocessed foods based on byproducts. In about 1895 in England, James Spratt started selling Spratt's cakes, which is considered the original dog food.

"That original formula was wheat flour, leftover fat ... salt and water, and then they baked it. The problem was it became moldy and rancid. So, mycotoxins ... were a huge issue. All throughout the early pet foods, from late 1800s, early 1900s, animals kept dying of nutritional deficiencies, as you can imagine," Dr. Becker says.

Canned dog and cat foods came next, followed by the introduction of kibble, by Purina, which has caused significant chronic disease in pets ever since, much like the introduction of ultraprocessed foods in the human diet. Dr. Becker explains:

"In 1945, Purina made rice and wheat Chex with this brand-new machine called an extruder. And it was in 1951 that their pet division said, 'Hey, can we borrow the extruder to extrude the very first bag of Purina dog chow?' 1951.

And they borrowed it from the human food extrusion line. And what they realized is, 'Oh my gosh, this extrudes an all-in-one, ready to eat, stored in the pantry, dump it in the bowl, from birth till death. All you have to do is feed this little brown crunchy ball, we'll add a synthetic, we'll take everything left over from the human food industry that can't be fed to humans.

We'll add a synthetic multivitamin and mineral to it, we'll extrude it at high temperatures, and then we'll package it and sell it as complete and balanced nutrition.' That was the beginning of the decline of overall health and wellbeing for companion animals."

She believes at least 50% of the degenerative diseases that we're seeing today in pets, including cancer, obesity, diabetes, organ failure, autoimmune disease, and allergies, are directly related to diet and lifestyle. In addition to the ultraprocessed nature of the food, there are quality control issues, in that food used for pets has failed human food inspection.

"Food that passes inspection goes into the human food market. Everything that fails inspection goes into animal feed, including dog and cat food. So, unless your pet food is labeled, 'Made with human-grade ingredients,' it is made from rendered, USDA inspected and failed raw materials.

Now, the food failed for a reason. Maybe mycotoxins, could be heavy metals. You're never going to know how the raw materials got into your pet's pet food."

The other issue is species appropriateness. Cats are carnivores and dogs are scavenging carnivores, but “the pet food industry is trying to convince pet owners that dogs are vegans and cats are omnivores, and that is not true.” Dr. Becker explains:

“Dogs’ and cats’ physiology has not evolved in the last 100 years to eat a bunch of highly processed refined carbs and oils. They just haven’t. So, when we put metabolically stressful foods into physiology that was never meant to process this, there are serious metabolic consequences. And that is exactly what we’re seeing in terms of degenerative disease today.”

What Do the Oldest Dogs in the World Have in Common?

While diet is among the most important factors in longevity, it’s not the only one. Dr. Becker is the coauthor of “The Forever Dog,” a book born out of her desire to know why and how some animals live so much longer than others. The book sold out 45 minutes after being released and became a No. 1 best seller for the New York Times.

Her coauthor, Rodney Habib, found and interviewed the world’s oldest dogs, including 30-year-old Maggie in Australia (who passed in 2016) and another 30-year-old dog, named Bobi, in Portugal, revealing that they share many things in common, most of them based on comprehensively healthy lifestyles. Dr. Becker says:

“Every single one of these dogs had some key variables in common. They all moved their bodies every day. They all were allowed to make choices. They were able to go outside and sniff and have direct sunshine, ground themselves. They had access to fresh food every day.

These animals had an entirely different set of variables that allowed them to have all the resources they need for appropriate detoxification as well as this robust nutrient intake from a whole variety of different foods over their lifetime

...

I think that [a] combination of healthy natural movement, a rich social life and an amazing diet are probably the key factors for extending health and wellbeing

in our pets.”

Moving Up on the Pet Food Spectrum

There’s a spectrum of commercially available pet foods, and the closer you get to fresh and raw, the better. The spectrum includes, from best to worst:

- 1. Fresh, raw food** – “Raw means unadulterated raw meat plus ground up veggies with appropriate sources of vitamins and minerals that's put together to mean a nutritionally complete and balanced diet,” Dr. Becker says.
- 2. Gently cooked foods and freeze-dried foods** – These “take all of these good organic, fresh, raw meats, and then either freeze-dry them quickly or gently cook them and then freeze them.”
- 3. Dehydrated pet foods** – The quality of these can vary, ranging from just dehydrated raw meat, which is excellent, to high carb and starchy, which is not.

“Dehydrated pet foods are one of the hardest categories to discern because you must do your research. Did they start with all raw meat-based, or did they start with a bunch of corn, wheat, rice, and peas? You need to flip over the label, make some phone calls, send the email, and discern the raw materials that dehydrated pet foods came from. But they’re still less heat treated than dry.”

- 4. Extruded dry food (kibble)** – This is like feeding fast-food to your pet each day.

Dr. Becker recommends pet parents consider where they are on this pet food spectrum, and then take steps to move closer to No. 1 – fresh, raw food:

“If you’ve got to continue feeding all extruded, ultraprocessed fast food to your dog or cat, then start thinking about how you can occasionally add in [fresh food] to maybe one or two of the 14 meals you feed your pets during the week. Could you swap in one or two homemade nutritionally complete meals, which are fresher foods?”

Could you swap out four meals of a homemade diet? Could you do a commercially available raw or fresh food in the morning and a dry food at night? How could you incrementally and stepwise go from all ultraprocessed calories to fewer and fewer ultraprocessed calories over the course of 14 meals in a week?"

Next, she recommends adding moisture to the food, especially for cats, which often develop kidney disease due to eating poorly. You can also top your pet's meals with a variety of fresh human foods, including fruit and vegetable scraps you might otherwise throw away:

"Add in those fresh food toppers that contain all the bioactives and polyphenols that contain all of the enzymes that have not been processed. That means the tops and bottoms of carrots.

That means the tops and bottoms of your snap peas, feed those to your dogs. Everything that you're cutting off of your fresh fruits and veggies, all those dented blueberries that you're like, 'Ooh, they're too soft for me,' feed them to your dogs.

That's the daily, ongoing source of table food or table scraps that you can share with your animals that provide these potent polyphenols and bioactives that are necessary for the rebuilding and the maintenance to prevent degeneration as animals go through life.

So, share your fresh foods. The only foods that you will not be sharing with your dogs and cats are onions – so no chives, leaks, onions, none of those. No chocolate obviously, and no raisins and grapes."

'Dogs Are Wired as Athletes'

Another important takeaway is that there are many low- or no-cost strategies you can use to improve your pet's health, and one of them is daily movement. Dr. Becker points out, "Dogs are wired as athletes ... Even the tiniest chihuahua."

So, they need exercise each day, and not simply roaming around a fenced-in backyard. They need “heart thumping, aerobic, muscle building endurance, a tongue out, panting good, really good anaerobic exercise.”

“We come home exhausted, we're tired at night. We don't really feel like helping our dogs who've been stuck in the house all day move their bodies. But I do believe it is our ethical and moral obligation to give them the opportunity to do that,” Dr. Becker says.

Along those lines, dogs also need to be outside, so ensuring your dog gets vigorous activity outdoors daily is “the best longevity gift you could ever give your dog, and it's free,” Dr. Becker says, adding:

“They need to have morning sun hit their retinas to be able to secrete adequate biologic hormones. They need to go for a walk at night to be able to secrete adequate melatonin. Dogs need to be outside and ground themselves and sniff to be able to take in their environment.”

Even going for long walks, including up and down hills or over curbs, is extremely beneficial for pets, and for you. Your pet will also benefit psychologically from this activity, reducing behavioral problems. “The No. 1 reason dogs are dumped at shelters are behavior problems and the level of anxiety in dogs,” Dr. Becker says. Providing them with an optimal diet and plenty of exercise can virtually eliminate that problem.

Partner With a Proactive Wellness Veterinarian

Many veterinarians are caught up in the conventional model of treating disease symptoms instead of working to prevent disease in the first place. If your veterinarian isn't helping you to make healthy choices that can help prevent degeneration in your pet, partner with an integrative veterinarian who will.

Symptoms such as chronic gastrointestinal issues, excessive shedding, intermittent constipation, diarrhea, or vomiting are all signs that something is out of balance in your pet's body — presenting an opportunity to make healthy changes for your pet before it's

too late. By being proactive, you can add many healthy years to your pet's life and enjoy many more moments of companionship together.

And remember, too, that pets don't complain, so it's often easy to miss those initial stages of degenerative disease. "So being a really astute pet parent is something that we need to practice as well." Dr. Becker adds:

"These are their bodies saying, 'I'm having a problem here.' And then it's up to us to be able to say, 'I'm not going to panic. I'm going to identify root causes, and if I don't have enough information to be able to go down the path of my veterinarian, I'm going to partner with a proactive wellness veterinarian who can, and I'm going to start putting into place a system of first diagnostics.

Let's find out why my animal has these symptoms, and then let's start with nontoxic protocols to heal and restore the underlying disease or damaged tissue to get my animal's body back on track.'

That's the logical progression of what pet parents can do to stop treating the symptoms of potential degenerative disease and start getting to the root causes of symptoms that are there months to years before the body breaks."

If overhauling your pet's diet and lifestyle sounds overwhelming, Dr. Becker stresses that even small changes can make a major difference to your pet's healthspan and well-being:

"Don't panic, take a deep breath, and you can make one minor change, one bite of food at a time. You can make minor but significant changes in your dog and cat's well-being by recognizing that you don't have to change everything this red-hot minute.

But you can begin working toward improving the health and the immediate environment that your dog and cat's DNA is in, to over time ultimately shift the trajectory from a life of probable degeneration to a life of prevention and

making the body resilient and strong through your intentional actions. So, the key is to not be overwhelmed, the key is to be empowered.”

Sources and References

- ¹ Evid Based Complement Alternat Med. 2012; 2012: 647896
- ² Mark Moss, Interview, 15:14